GRAPHS, MAPS, TREES

Abstract Models for a Literary History

FRANCO MORETTI

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Graphs, maps, trees

> A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?
>
> Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

The title of this short book deserves a few words of explanation. To begin with, this is an essay on literary history: literature, the old territory (more or less), unlike the drift towards other discourses so typical of recent years. But within that old territory, a new object of study: instead of concrete, individual works, a trio of artificial constructs—graphs, maps, and trees—in which the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. 'Distant reading', I have once called this type of approach;[1] where distance is however not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models.

From texts to models, then; and models drawn from three disciplines with which literary studies have had little or no interaction: graphs

[1] 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1, Jan–Feb 2000.

from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory. The distant reason for these choices lies in my Marxist formation, which was profoundly influenced by Galvano DellaVolpe, and entailed therefore (in principle, if not always in practice) a great respect for the scientific spirit. And so, while recent literary theory was turning for inspiration towards French and German metaphysics, I kept thinking that there was actually much more to be learned from the natural and the social sciences. This book is a result of that conviction, and also, in its small way, an attempt to open a new front of discussion.

Finally, these three models are indeed, as the subtitle intimates, abstract. But their consequences are on the other hand extremely concrete: graphs, maps, and trees place the literary field literally in front of our eyes—and show us how little we still know about it. It is a double lesson, of humility and euphoria at the same time: humility for what literary history has accomplished so far (not enough), and euphoria for what still remains to be done (a lot). Here, the methodology of the book reveals its pragmatic ambition: for me, abstraction is not an end in itself, but a way to widen the domain of the literary historian, and enrich its internal problematic. How this may be done, is what I will try to explain.[2]

[2] This book was first imagined at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, and presented in an early version as the Beckman Lectures at Berkeley, and then elsewhere. My thanks to the many people who have helped me to clarify my ideas, and to Matt Jockers, who patiently taught me how to improve the book's visual side.

Graphs

Before the advent of the Annales, Krzysztof Pomian once wrote,

> the gaze of the historian [was directed] towards extraordinary events . . . historians resembled collectors: both gathered only rare and curious objects, disregarding whatever looked banal, everyday, normal . . . History was an idiographic discipline, having as its object that which does not repeat itself.[1]

History *was* . . . Pomian speaks in the past tense here, as is probably accurate in the case of social history, but certainly not for its literary counterpart, where the collector of rare and curious works, that do not repeat themselves, exceptional—and which close reading makes even more exceptional, by emphasizing the uniqueness of exactly *this* word and *this* sentence here—is still by far the dominant figure. But what would happen if literary historians, too, decided to 'shift their gaze' (Pomian again) 'from the extraordinary to the everyday, from exceptional events to the large mass of facts'? What literature would we find, in 'the large mass of facts'?

All questions that occurred to me some years ago, when the study of national bibliographies made me realize what a minimal fraction

[1] Krzysztof Pomian, 'L'histoire des structures', in Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, Jacques Revel, eds, *La nouvelle histoire*, Paris 1978, pp. 115–16.

of the literary field we all work on: a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain (and *is* much larger than the current one), but is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows—and close reading won't help here, a novel a day every day of the year would take a century or so . . . And it's not even a matter of time, but of method: a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole—and the graphs that follow are one way to begin doing this. Or as Fernand Braudel put it in the lecture on history he gave to his companions in the German prison camp near Lübeck:

> An incredible number of dice, always rolling, dominate and determine each individual existence: uncertainty, then, in the realm of individual history; but in that of collective history . . . simplicity and consistency. History is indeed 'a poor little conjectural science' when it selects individuals as its objects . . . but much more rational in its procedures and results, when it examines groups and repetitions.[2]

A more rational literary history. That is the idea.

I

The quantitative approach to literature can take several different forms—from computational stylistics to thematic databases, book history, and more. For reasons of space, I will here limit myself to book history, building on work originally done by McBurney, Beasley, Raven, Garside and Block for Britain; Angus, Mylne and Frautschi for France; Zwicker for Japan; Petersen for Denmark; Ragone for Italy;

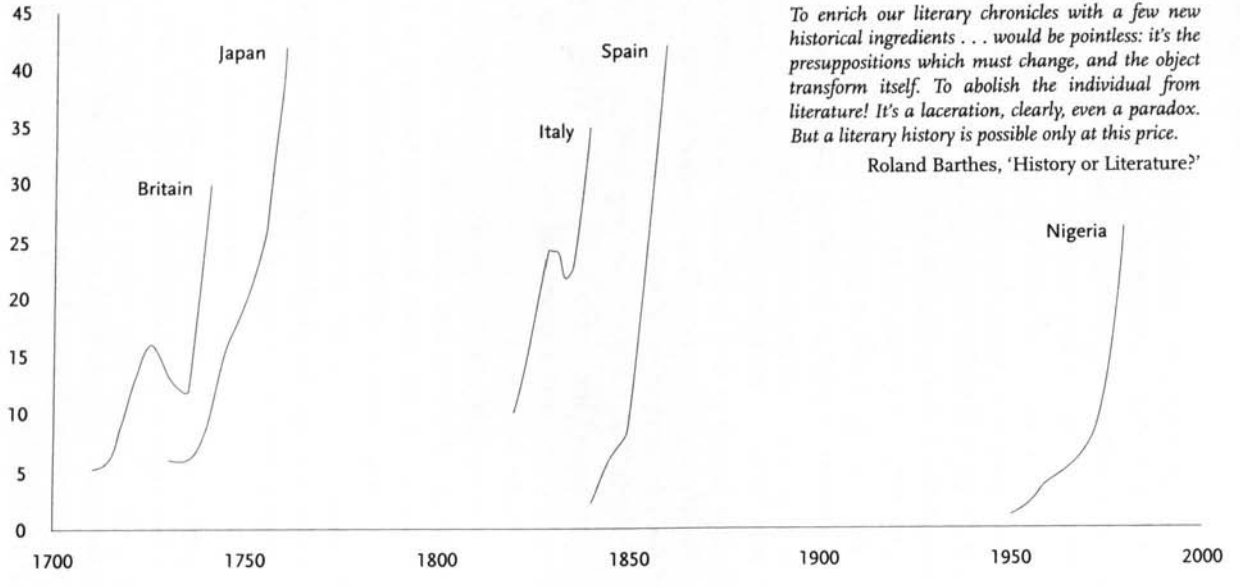
[2] Fernand Braudel, 'L'histoire, mesure du monde', in *Les écrits de Fernand Braudel*, vol. II, Paris 1997.

Martí-Lopez and Santana for Spain; Joshi for India; and Griswold for Nigeria. And I mention these names right away because quantitative work is truly *cooperation*: not only in the pragmatic sense that it takes forever to gather the data, but because such data are ideally independent from any individual researcher, and can thus be shared by others, and combined in more than one way. Figure 1 (overleaf), which charts the take-off of the novel in Britain, Japan, Italy, Spain and Nigeria, is a case in point. See how similar those shapes are: five countries, three continents, over two centuries apart, and it's really the same pattern, the same old metaphor of the 'rise' of the novel come alive: in twenty years or so (in Britain, 1720–40; Japan, 1745–65; Italy, 1820–40; Spain, 1845 to early 1860s; Nigeria, 1965–80), the graph leaps from five–ten new titles per year, which means one new novel every month or two, to one new novel *per week*. And at this point, the horizon of novel-reading changes. As long as only a handful of new titles are published each year, I mean, novels remain unreliable products, that disappear for long stretches of time, and cannot really command the loyalty of the reading public; they are commodities, yes—but commodities still waiting for a fully developed market. A new novel per week, by contrast, is already the great capitalist oxymoron of the *regular novelty*: the unexpected that is produced with such efficiency and punctuality that readers become unable to do without it. The novel 'becomes a necessity of life', to paraphrase the title of a book by William Gilmore-Lehne, and the jeremiads that immediately multiply around it—novels make readers lazy, stupid, dissolute, insane, insubordinate: exactly like films two centuries later—are the clearest sign of its symbolic triumph.

II

The rise of the novel, then; or, better, *one* rise in a history which had begun many centuries earlier, and will go through several other accelerations, as emerges quite clearly from the data on the publication

FIGURE 1: *The rise of the novel, 18th to 20th century*

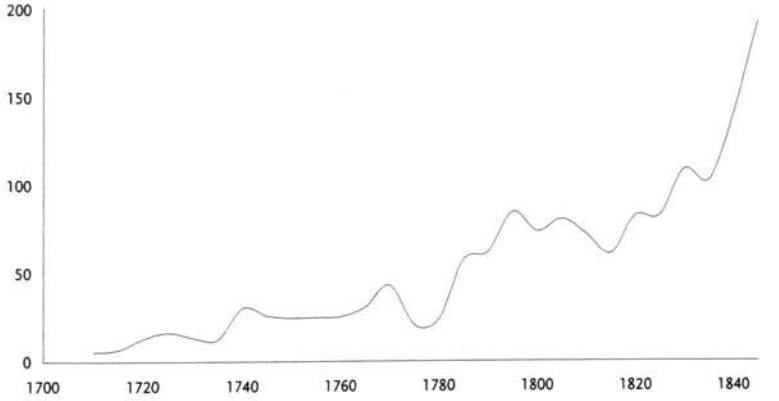


To enrich our literary chronicles with a few new historical ingredients . . . would be pointless: it's the presuppositions which must change, and the object transform itself. To abolish the individual from literature! It's a laceration, clearly, even a paradox. But a literary history is possible only at this price.

Roland Barthes, 'History or Literature?'

New novels per year, by 5-year average. Sources: For Britain: W. H. McBurney, *A Check List of English Prose Fiction, 1700–39*, Cambridge, MA 1960, and J. C. Beasley, *The Novels of the 1740s*, Athens, GA 1982; both partly revised by James Raven, *British Fiction 1750–70: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland*, London 1987. For Japan: Jonathan Zwicker, 'Il lungo Ottocento del romanzo giapponese', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III, *Storia e geografia*, Torino 2002. For Italy: Giovanni Ragone, 'Italia 1815–70', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III. For Spain: Elisa Martí-Lopez and Mario Santana, 'Spagna 1843–1900', *Il romanzo*, vol. III. For Nigeria: Wendy Griswold, 'Nigeria 1950–2000', *Il romanzo*, vol. III.

FIGURE 2: *The three rises of the British novel*



New novels per year, by 5-year average. Sources: McBurney, *Check List of English Prose Fiction, 1700–39*; Beasley, *The Novels of the 1740s*; Raven, *British Fiction 1750–70*; Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling, eds, *The English Novel 1770–1829*, 2 vols, Oxford 2000; Andrew Block, *The English Novel, 1740–1850*, London 1961.

of new novels in Britain between 1710 and 1850 (figure 2). Here, three phases seem to stand out, each subdivided into a first period of rapid growth and a second one of stabilization, and each modifying in a specific way the social role of the novel. The first phase, from 1720 to around 1770, is the one discussed above: a leap in 1720–40, and a consolidation in the following decades. In the second phase, which runs from 1770 to around 1820, the further increase in the number of new titles induces for its part a drastic reorientation of audiences towards the present. Up to then, I mean, the 'extensive' reading so typical of the novel—reading many texts once and superficially, rather than a few texts often and intensely—would easily outgrow the yearly output of titles, forcing readers to turn to the past for (much of) their entertainment: all sorts of reprints and abridgements of eighteenth-century bestsellers, British as well as foreign,

plus the old, and even the few ancient classics of the genre. But as the total of new novels doubles, compared to the previous phase—80 in 1788; 91 in 1796; 111 in 1808—the popularity of old books suddenly collapses, and novelistic audiences turn resolutely (and irreversibly) towards the current season.[3]

The third phase, which begins around 1820, and which unfortunately I can only follow for the first thirty years, is the one in which the *internal composition* of the market changes. So far, the typical reader of novels had been a 'generalist'—someone 'who reads absolutely anything, at random', as Thibaudet was to write with a touch of contempt in *Le liseur de romans*.[4] Now, however, the growth of the market creates all sorts of niches for 'specialist' readers and genres (nautical tales, sporting novels, school stories, *mystères*): the books aimed at urban workers in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, or at boys, and then girls, in the following generation, are simply the most visible instances of this larger process, which culminates at the turn of the century in the super-niches of detective fiction and then science fiction.

Abstract models for literary history . . . and we certainly have abstraction here: *Pamela, The Monk, The Wild Irish Girl, Persuasion, Oliver Twist*—where are they? five tiny dots in the graph of figure 2, indistinguishable from all others. But graphs are not really *models*; they are not simplified, intuitive versions of a theoretical structure in the way maps and (especially) evolutionary trees will be in the next two chapters.

[3] 'In Italy,' writes Giovanni Ragone, 'in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century virtually all the bestsellers of the previous century disappear', 'Italia 1815–1870', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III, pp. 343–54. A similar shift seems to occur in France, where, however, the caesura of the revolution offers a very strong alternative explanation. The 'pastness of the past' is of course the key message of the two genres—gothic, and then historical novels—most responsible for the turn towards the present.

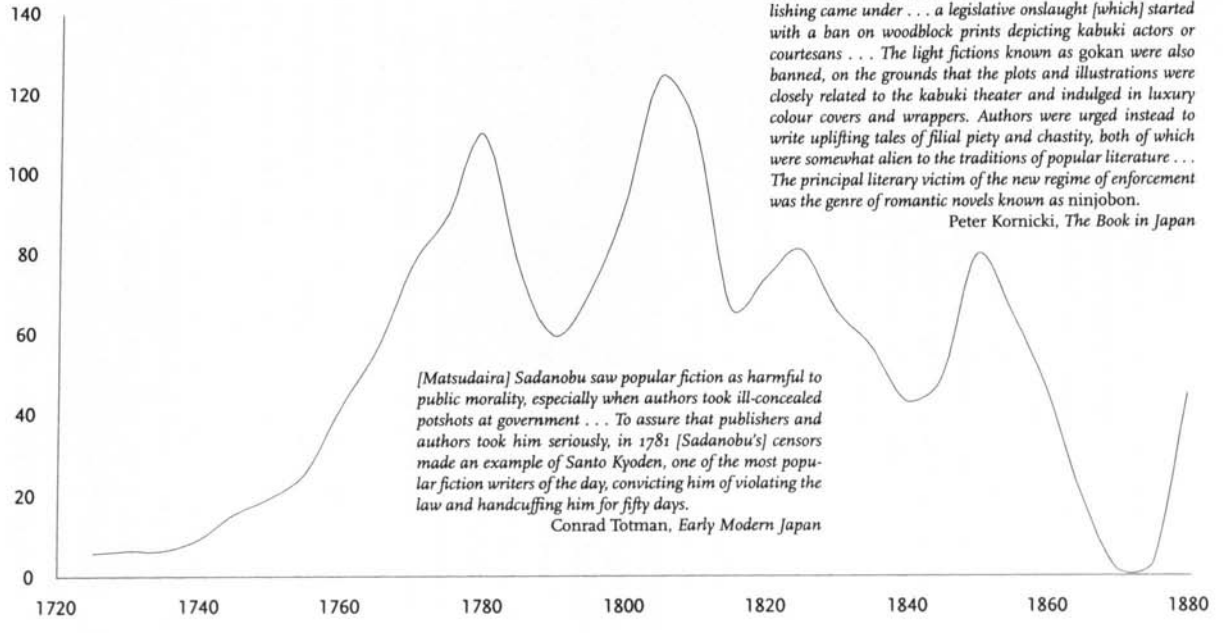
[4] Albert Thibaudet, *Il lettore di romanzi* [1925], Napoli 2000, p. 49.

Quantitative research provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations, I said earlier, and that is of course also its limit: it provides *data*, not interpretation. That figure 2 shows a first 'rise' (when the novel becomes a necessity of life), and then a second (the shift from the past to the present), and then a third (the multiplication of market niches), seems to me a good account of the data, but is certainly far from inevitable. Quantitative data can tell us when Britain produced one new novel per month, or week, or day, or hour for that matter, but where the significant turning points lie along the continuum—and why—is something that must be decided on a different basis.

III

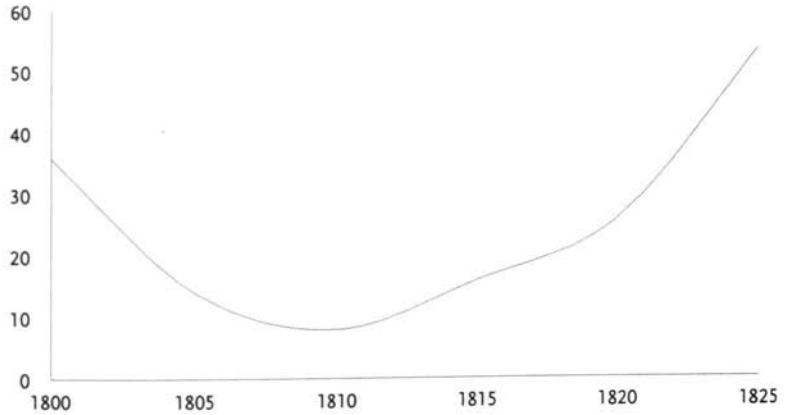
A—multiple—rise of the novel. But with an interesting twist, which is particularly visible in the Japanese case of figure 3 (overleaf): after the rise from one novel per month in the mid-1740s to one per week twenty years later (and even more in the following years: between 1750 and 1820, in fact, many more novels are published in Japan than in Britain; a fact which deserves a good explanation!)—several equally rapid downturns occur in 1780–90, the 1810s to the 1830s, and in 1860–70. The fall of the novel. And the reason behind the downturns seems to be always the same: politics—a direct, virulent censorship during the Kansei and Tempo periods, and an indirect influence in the years leading up to the Meiji Restoration, when there was no specific repression of the book trade, and the crisis was thus probably due to a more general dissonance between the rhythm of political crises and the writing of novels. It's the same in Denmark during the Napoleonic wars (figure 4, overleaf), or in France and Italy (better, Milan) in comparable situations (figure 5, overleaf): after 1789, the publication of French novels drops about 80 per cent; after the first Risorgimento war, the Milanese downturn is around 90 per cent, with only 3 novels published in the course of 1849, against 43 in 1842.

FIGURE 3: *The fall of the novel: Japan*



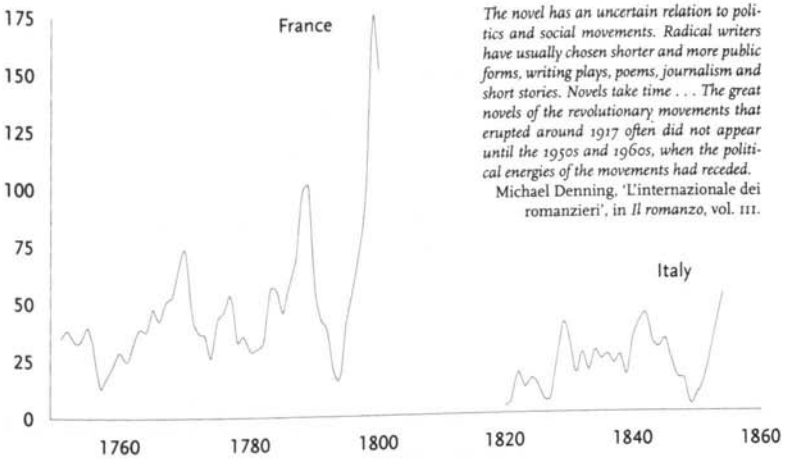
New novels per year, by 5-year average. Source: Jonathan Zwicker, 'Il lungo Ottocento del romanzo giapponese', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III. See also Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, Berkeley 1993; Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, Leiden 1998.

FIGURE 4: *The fall of the novel: Denmark*



New novels per year, by 5-year average. Source: Erland Munch-Petersen, *Die Übersetzungsliteratur als Unterhaltung des romantischen Lesers*, Wiesbaden 1991.

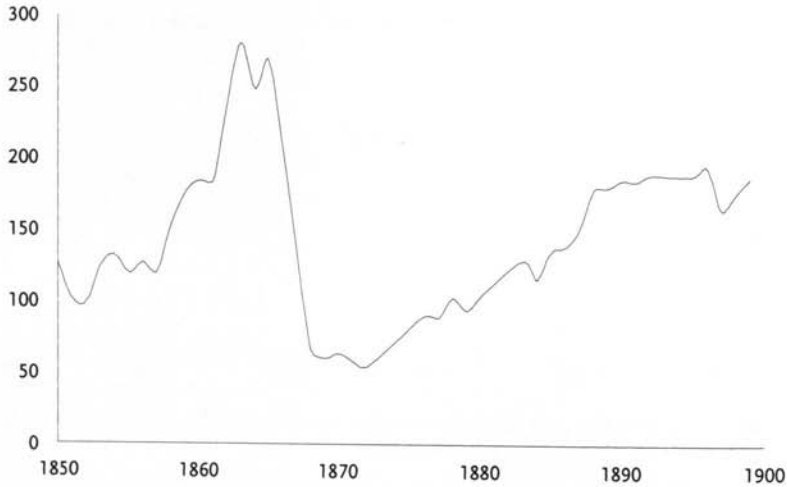
FIGURE 5: *The fall of the novel: France, Italy*



The novel has an uncertain relation to politics and social movements. Radical writers have usually chosen shorter and more public forms, writing plays, poems, journalism and short stories. Novels take time . . . The great novels of the revolutionary movements that erupted around 1917 often did not appear until the 1950s and 1960s, when the political energies of the movements had receded.
Michael Denning, 'L'internazionale dei romanzieri', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III.

New novels per year. Sources: For France: Angus Martin, Vivienne G. Mylne and Richard Frautschi, eds, *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français 1751–1800*, Paris 1977. For Milan: Giovanni Ragone, 'Italia 1815–70', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III, and *Catalogo dei libri italiani dell'Ottocento*, Milano 1991.

FIGURE 6: *Book imports into India*



Thousands of pounds sterling. Source: Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*, New York 2002.

The only exception I know to this pattern is the import of British books into India charted by Priya Joshi (figure 6), which rises sharply after the 1857 rebellion; but as Joshi points out, the logic of a colonial relationship is reversed, and the peak is a sign of Britain suddenly accelerating the pace of symbolic hegemony; then, once the crisis is over, the flow returns to its pre-1857 levels.

IV

An antipathy between politics and the novel. Still, it would be odd if *all* crises in novelistic production had a political origin: the French downturn of the 1790s was sharp, true, but there had been others in the 1750s and 1770s—as there had been in Britain, for that matter,

notwithstanding its greater institutional stability. The American and the Napoleonic wars may well be behind the slumps of 1775–83 and 1810–17 (which are clearly visible in figure 2), write Raven and Garside in their splendid bibliographic studies; but then they add to the political factor 'a decade of poorly produced novels', 'reprints', the possible 'greater relative popularity . . . of other fictional forms', 'a backlash against low fiction', the high cost of paper . . .[5] And as possible causes multiply, one wonders: what are we trying to explain here—two *unrelated individual events*, or two moments *in a recurring pattern of ups and downs*? Because if the downturns are individual events, then looking for individual causes (Napoleon, reprints, the cost of paper, whatever) makes perfect sense; but if they are parts of a pattern, then what we must explain is *the pattern as a whole*, not just one of its phases.

The whole pattern; or, as some historians would say, the whole cycle: 'An increasingly clear idea has emerged . . . of the multiplicity of time', writes Braudel in the essay on *longue durée*:

> Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the headlong, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative . . . The new economic and social history puts cyclical movement in the forefront of its research . . . large sections of the past, ten, twenty, fifty years at a stretch . . . Far beyond this . . . we find a history capable of traversing even greater distances . . . to be measured in centuries . . . the long, even the very long time span, the *longue durée*.[6]

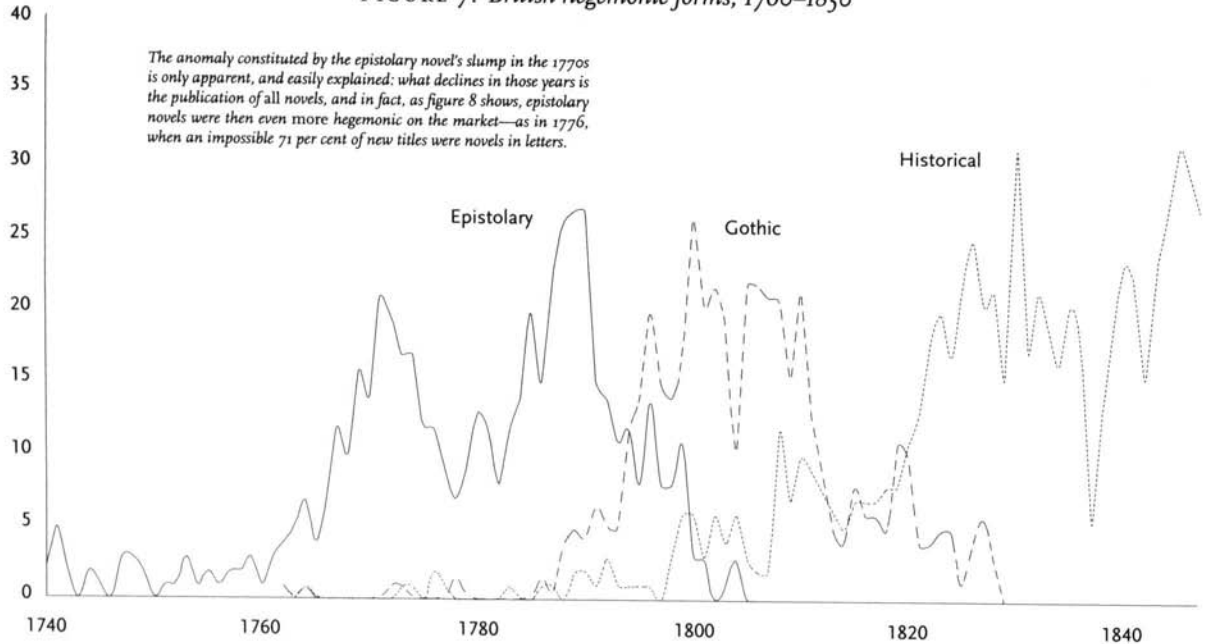
[5] James Raven, 'Historical Introduction: the Novel Comes of Age', and Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era: Consolidation and Dispersal', in Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling, eds, *The English Novel 1770–1829*, 2 vols, Oxford 2000; vol. I, p. 27, and vol. II, p. 44.

[6] Fernand Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences. The *longue durée*', in *On History*, Chicago 1980, p. 27. The first extended treatment of economic cycles was of course Nikolai Kondratiev's *The Long Wave Cycle*, written between 1922 and 1928.

Event, cycle, *longue durée*: three time frames which have fared very unevenly in literary studies. Most critics are perfectly at ease with the first one, the circumscribed domain of the event and of the individual case; most theorists are at home at the opposite end of the temporal spectrum, in the very long span of nearly unchanging structures. But the middle level has remained somewhat unexplored by literary historians; and it's not even that we don't work within that time frame, it's that we haven't yet fully understood its specificity: the fact, I mean, that cycles constitute *temporary structures within the historical flow*. That is, after all, the hidden logic behind Braudel's tripartition: the short span is all flow and no structure, the *longue durée* all structure and no flow, and cycles are the—unstable—border country between them. Structures, because they introduce repetition in history, and hence regularity, order, pattern; and temporary, because they're short (ten, twenty, fifty years, this depends on the theory).

Now, 'temporary structures' is also a good definition for—genres: morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time. Janus-like creatures, with one face turned to history and the other to form, genres are thus the true protagonists of this middle layer of literary history—this more 'rational' layer where flow and form meet. It's the regularity of figures 7 and 8 (overleaf), with their three waves of epistolary novels from 1760 to 1790, and then gothic novels from 1790 to 1815, and then historical novels from 1815 to the 1840s. Each wave produces more or less the same number of novels per year, and lasts the same 25–30 years, and each also rises only after the previous wave has begun to ebb away (see how the up- and downward trends intersect around 1790 and 1815). 'The new form makes its appearance to replace an old form that has outlived its artistic usefulness', writes Shklovsky, and the decline of a ruling genre seems indeed here to be the necessary precondition for its successor's take-off. Which may explain those odd 'latency periods' in the early history of genres: *Pamela* is published in 1740, and *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, but very few epistolary or gothic novels are written until 1760

FIGURE 7: *British hegemonic forms, 1760–1850*



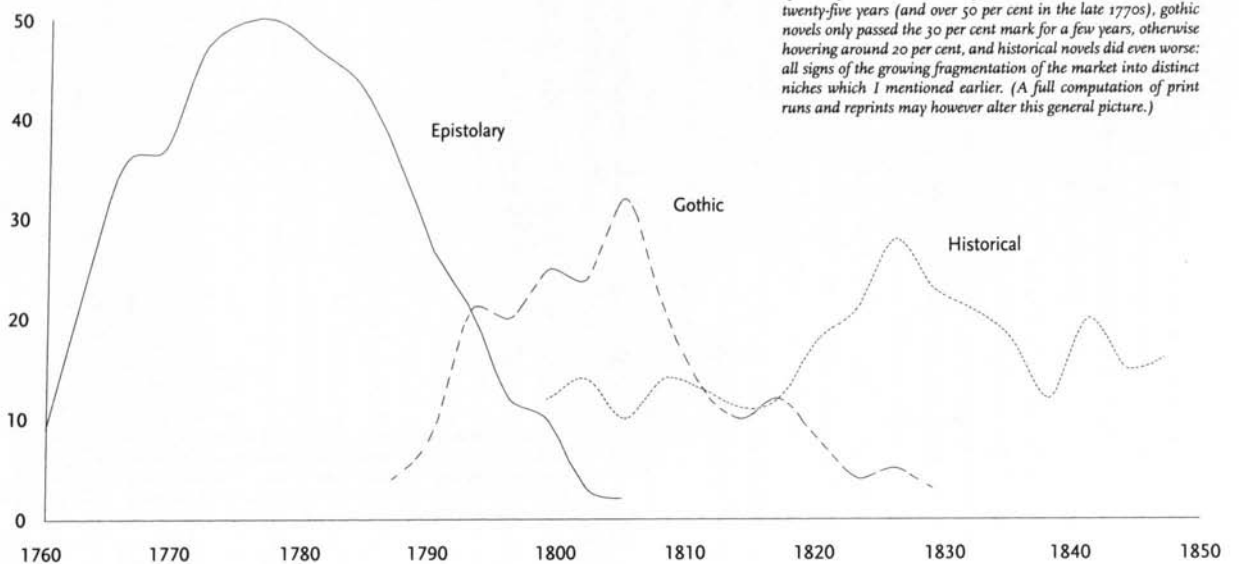
New novels per year. Sources: For the epistolary novel: James Raven, 'Gran Bretagna 1750–1830', in *Il romanzo*, vol. III, pp. 311–12. For the gothic novel: Maurice Lévy, *Le roman 'gothique' anglais*, Paris 1995. For the historical novel, I have taken as the basis the checklist provided by Rainer Schöwerling ('Sir Walter Scott and the Tradition of the Historical Novel before 1814', in Uwe Böker, Manfred Markus, Rainer Schöwerling, eds, *The Living Middle Ages*, Stuttgart 1989), and subtracted those texts that also appear in Lévy's bibliography of the gothic; for the later period, I have also used Block, *The English Novel, 1740–1850*.

FIGURE 8: *Market quotas of British hegemonic forms, 1760–1850*

All works of art, and not only parodies, are created either as a parallel or an antithesis to some model. The new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness.

Viktor Shklovsky, *A Theory of Prose*

As more and more novels are published every year, the hegemony of a single genre tends to become less and less absolute: whereas epistolary novels amounted to 30 per cent or more of the market for twenty-five years (and over 50 per cent in the late 1770s), gothic novels only passed the 30 per cent mark for a few years, otherwise hovering around 20 per cent, and historical novels did even worse: all signs of the growing fragmentation of the market into distinct niches which I mentioned earlier. (A full computation of print runs and reprints may however alter this general picture.)



Percentage of novels published, 3-year average.

and 1790 respectively. Why the lag? Almost certainly, because as long as a hegemonic form has not lost its 'artistic usefulness', there is not much that a rival form can do: there can always be an exceptional text, yes, but the exception *will not change the system*. It's only when Ptolemaic astronomy begins to generate one 'monstrosity' after another, writes Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that 'the time comes to give a competitor a chance'—and the same is true here: a historical novel written in 1800, such as *Castle Rackrent* (or in 1805, like *Waverley*'s abandoned first draft) simply didn't have the incredible opportunity to reshape the literary field that the collapse of the gothic offered *Waverley* in 1814.[7]

V

From individual cases to series; from series to cycles, and then to genres as their morphological embodiment. And these three genres

[7] A few more words on why a form loses its 'artistic usefulness' and disappears. For Shklovsky, the reason is the purely inner dialectic of art, which begins in creative estrangement, and ends in stale automatism: 'Each art form travels down the inevitable road from birth to death; from seeing and sensory perception, when every detail in the object is savoured and relished, to mere recognition, when form becomes a dull epigone which our senses register mechanically, a piece of merchandise not visible even to the buyer.' (The passage is from an article collected in *The Knight's Move*, and is quoted by Victor Erlich in *Russian Formalism*, New Haven 1955, p. 252.) This journey 'down the inevitable road from birth to death' can however also be explained by focusing, not so much on the relationship between the 'young' and the 'old' versions of the same form, but rather on that between the form and its historical context: a genre exhausts its potentialities—and the time comes to give a competitor a chance—when its inner form is no longer capable of representing the most significant aspects of contemporary reality. At which point, either the genre loses its form under the impact of reality, thereby disintegrating, or it turns its back to reality in the name of form, becoming a 'dull epigone' indeed. (I develop this point in the appendix to the new edition of *The Way of the World*, '"A useless longing for myself": The crisis of the European *Bildungsroman*, 1898–1914', London 2000.) But we will soon see another, more draconian explanation for the disappearance of forms.

seem indeed to follow a rather regular 'life-cycle', as some economists would call it. These genres—or *all* genres? Is this wave-like pattern a sort of hidden pendulum of literary history?

Here, the gathering of data is obviously crucial, and I decided to rely entirely on other people's work: since we are all eager to find what we are looking for, using the evidence gathered by other scholars, with completely different research programmes, is always a good corrective to one's desires. So, first Brad Pasanek, at Stanford, and then I, consulted over a hundred studies of British genres between 1740 and 1900; there were some dubious cases, of course, and some (not very significant) disagreements in periodization;[8] and although this is still very much work-in-progress, especially at the two ends of the temporal spectrum, the forty-four genres of figure 9 provide a large enough set to support some reflections.

Forty-four genres over 160 years; but instead of finding one new genre every four years or so, as a random distribution would have it, over two thirds of them cluster in just thirty years, divided in six major bursts of creativity: the late 1760s, early 1790s, late 1820s, 1850, early 1870s, and mid–late 1880s. And the genres also tend to *disappear* in clusters: with the exception of the turbulence of 1790–1810, a rather regular changing of the guard takes place, where half a dozen genres quickly leave the scene, as many move in, and then remain in place for twenty-five years or so. Instead of changing all the time and a little at a time, then, the system stands still for decades, and is then 'punctuated' by brief bursts of invention: forms change once, rapidly, across the board, and then repeat themselves for two–three decades: 'normal literature', we could call it, in analogy to Kuhn's normal

[8] When specialists disagreed, I always opted for the periodization arising out of the more convincing morphological argument: in the case of industrial novels, for instance, I followed Gallagher rather than Cazamian, although the latter's periodization of 1830–50 would have fitted my argument much better than Gallagher's 1832–67. For details, see 'A Note on the Taxonomy of the Forms', p. 31.

FIGURE 9: *British novelistic genres, 1740–1900*

For sources, see 'A Note on the Taxonomy of the Forms', page 31.

science. Or think of Jauss's 'horizon of expectations': a metaphor we tend to evoke only 'negatively' (that is to say, when a text transcends the given horizon), but which these graphs present instead, 'positively', for what it is: figures 7–8 showing how difficult it actually is to transcend the hegemonic horizon, figure 9 presenting the multiple horizons active at any given moment, and so on.

VI

Normal literature remains in place for twenty-five years or so . . . But where does this rhythm come from? Shklovsky's hypothesis (however modified) cannot explain it, because the connexion between the decline of an old form and the rise of a new one implies nothing about the regularity of the replacement. And widespread regularity: not just the few hegemonic genres, but (almost) all genres active at any given time seem to arise and disappear together according to some hidden rhythm.

The simultaneity of the turnover, at first sight so uncanny, is probably the key to the solution. When one genre replaces another, it's reasonable to assume that the cause is internal to the two genres, and historically specific: amorous epistolary fiction being ill-equipped to capture the traumas of the revolutionary years, say—and gothic novels being particularly good at it. But when several genres disappear *together* from the literary field, and then another group, and so on, then the reason has to be different, because all these forms cannot have run *independently and simultaneously* into insoluble problems—it would be simply too much of a coincidence. The causal mechanism must thus be *external* to the genres, and *common* to all: like a sudden, total change of their ecosystem. Which is to say: a change of their audience. Books survive if they are read and disappear if they aren't: and when an entire generic system vanishes at once, the likeliest explanation is that *its readers vanished at once.*

This, then, is where those 25–30 years come from: generations. Not a concept I am very fond of, actually, but the only one that seems to make sense of figure 9. And indeed, in Mannheim's great essay of 1927, the best evidence for his thesis comes precisely from the aesthetic sphere: 'a rhythm in the sequence of generations', he writes, following Mentré's *Les générations sociales*, published a few years earlier,

> is far more apparent in the realm of the *séries libres*—free human groupings such as salons and literary circles—than in the realm of the institutions, which for the most part lay down a lasting pattern of behaviour, either by prescriptions or by the organization of collective undertakings, thus preventing the new generation from showing its originality . . . The aesthetic sphere is perhaps the most appropriate to reflect overall changes of mental climate.[9]

Overall changes of the mental climate: the five, six shifts in the British novelistic field between 1740 and 1900. But since people are born every day, not every twenty-five years, on what basis can the biological continuum be segmented into discrete units? Mannheim again:

> Whether a new *generation style* emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the trigger action of the social and cultural process . . . We shall therefore speak of a *generation as an actuality* only where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization.[10]

A bond due to a process of dynamic destabilization; and one who was eighteen in 1968 understands. But again, this cannot possibly explain the *regularity* of generational replacement, unless one assumes—absurdly—that the 'destabilizations' themselves occur punctually every twenty-five or thirty years. And so, I close on a note

[9] Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London 1952, p. 279.

[10] *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, pp. 303, 310.

of perplexity: *faute de mieux*, some kind of generational mechanism seems the best way to account for the regularity of the novelistic cycle—but 'generation' is itself a very questionable concept. Clearly, we must do better.[11]

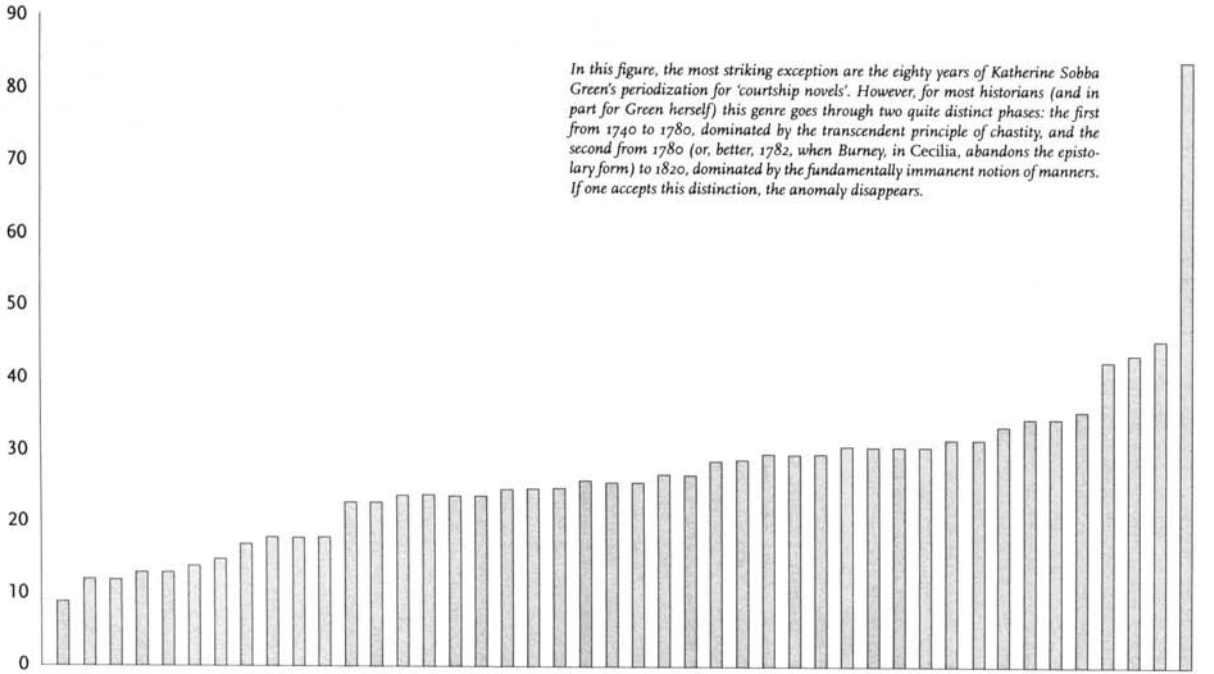
VII

Normal literature remains in place for a generation or so . . . It's the central group of figure 10, which rearranges the forty-four genres according to their duration, and where about two thirds of them last indeed between 23 and 35 years.[12] The one large exception is formed by those genres—nine years, ten, twelve—on the left end of the spectrum: why so short-lived? Almost certainly, because of politics again: Jacobin, anti-Jacobin, evangelical novels around the turn of the century,

[11] A possible solution: at some point, a particularly significant 'destabilization' gives rise to a clearly defined generation, which occupies centre stage for 20–30 years, attracting within its orbit, and shaping after its mould, slightly younger or older individuals. Once biological age pushes this generation to the periphery of the cultural system, there is suddenly room for a new generation, which comes into being simply *because it can*, destabilization or not; and so on, and on. A regular series would thus emerge even without a 'trigger action' *for each new generation*: once the generational clock has been set in motion, it will run its course—for some time at least. (This is in fact Mentré's approach to the problem, especially in the long chapter in which he sketches an unbroken series of generations throughout French literature from 1515 to 1915.)

[12] A first look at French literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century suggests that most of its narrative genres have a similar 30-year span: pastoral and heroic novels, the *nouvelle historique*, *romans galants* and *contes philosophiques*, sentimental novels, the *Bildungsroman*, the *roman gai*, the two main phases ('heroic' and 'sentimental') of the *roman-feuilleton* . . . On the other hand, Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos and other Brazilian literary historians have pointed out that when a country *imports* most of its novels, the regular turnover of the Anglo-French generations is replaced by a much more accelerated and possibly uneven tempo. If they are right—and I think they are—then the Western European case would once more be the exception rather than the rule of world literature.

FIGURE 10: *British novelistic genres, 1740–1915 (duration in years)*



For sources, see 'A Note on the Taxonomy of the Forms', page 31.

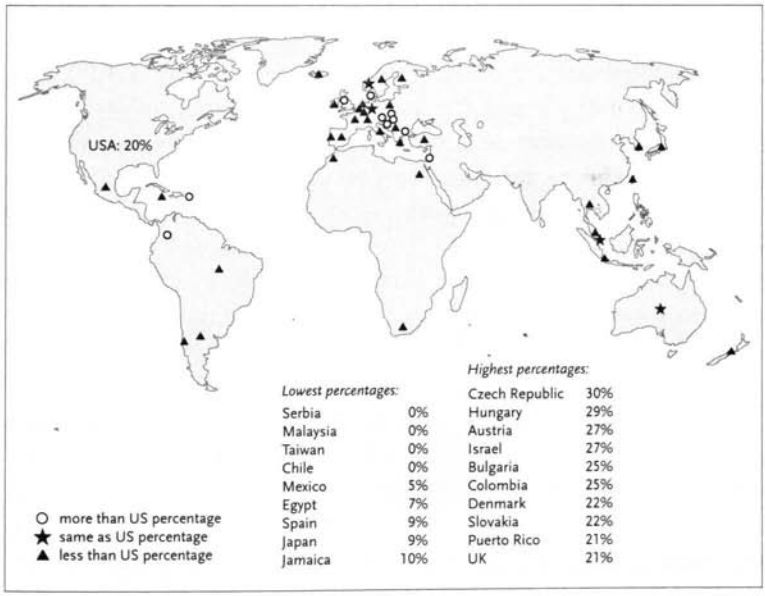
Chartist and religious narratives in the 1840s, New Woman novels in the 1890s . . . And as often happens with politics and the novel, the outcome is a string of explicit ideological declarations: Jacobin novels trying to reform their villains by 'discussion and reasoning', as Gary Kelly puts it; Right Reason, adds Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*: a 'puzzling' choice, she goes on, the great 'missed opportunity' of the Jacobin novel as a form. Missed opportunity, yes, but puzzling, perhaps not: if a novel wants to engage the political sphere directly, a series of unambiguous statements, however narratively dull, is a perfectly rational choice. And then, ideological exchanges are an easy way to capture Braudel's 'dramatic rush of the event': to turn a book into *A tale of the times, A tale of the day, The philosophy of the day*, to quote some typical 1790s subtitles. But the conjunction of course works both ways: if what most attracts readers is the drama of the day, then, once the day is over, so is the novel . . .

VIII

Why did most British genres last 25–30 years, then, but some of them only ten? Because these 'political' forms subordinated narrative logic to the tempo of the short span, I have conjectured, and thus they also disappeared with the short span; and I hope the answer sounds plausible. But the real point, here, is less the specific answer, than the total *heterogeneity of problem and solution*: to make sense of quantitative data, I had to abandon the quantitative universe, and turn to morphology: evoke form, in order to explain figures. Here, the figures of the literary market. But when I studied the international impact of American films, I encountered exactly the same problematic: in the sample decade (1986–95), comedies amounted to 20% of the top box office hits within the United States, whereas elsewhere, as figure 11 shows, they were a lot less successful (especially in Asia and in the Mediterranean).[13] The figures were crystal clear. But if one then

[13] 'Planet Hollywood', New Left Review 9, May–June 2001, pp. 90–101.

FIGURE 11: *US comedies as a percentage of top five box office hits, 1986–95*



wondered *why* this was so—why, in other words, comedies were so much harder to export than, say, action films—percentages offered no help, and the explanation had to be sought once again in the realm of form: as contemporary comedies make large use of jokes, which are often lost in translation, American comedies are quite simply a lot less funny in Japanese or Egyptian or Spanish than in English. (Not for nothing, the great international age of comic films—Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy—coincided with silent cinema.)[14]

[14] See here how a quantitative history of literature is also a profondly formalist one—especially at the beginning and at the end of the research process. At the end, for the reasons we have just seen; and at the beginning, because a formal concept is usually what makes quantification possible in the first place: since a series must be composed of homogeneous objects, a morphological category is needed—'novel', 'anti-Jacobin novel', 'comedy', etc—to establish such homogeneity.

Quantification poses the problem, then, and form offers the solution. But let me add: if you are lucky. Because the asymmetry of a quantitative *explanandum* and a qualitative *explanans* leaves you often with a perfectly clear problem—and no idea of a solution. In 'Planet Hollywood', for instance, it turned out that absolutely *all* Italian box office hits of the sample decade were comedies; why that was so, however, was completely unclear. I felt I had to say something, so I presented an 'explanation', and NLR indulgently printed it; but it was silly of me, because the most interesting aspect of those data was that *I had found a problem for which I had absolutely no solution*. And problems without a solution are exactly what we need in a field like ours, where we are used to asking only those questions for which we already have an answer. 'I have noticed,' says Brecht's Herr Keuner, 'that we put many people off our teaching because we have an answer to everything. Could we not, in the interest of propaganda, draw up a list of the questions that appear to us completely unsolved?'

IX

Two brief theoretical conclusions. The first is again on the cycle as the hidden thread of literary history. 'For the elevation of the novel to occur', writes William Warner in *Licensing Entertainment*, 'the novel of amorous intrigue must . . . disappear'; it is 'the Great Gender Shift' of the mid-eighteenth century, adds April Alliston: the disappearance of earlier fiction by women writers, with the related increase in the number of male novelists. And it's all true, except for the article: *the* shift? The third quarter of the nineteenth century, write Tuchman and Fortin in *Edging Women Out*, was 'the period of invasion' of the novelistic field by male authors, who eventually 'edge out' their female competitors.[15]

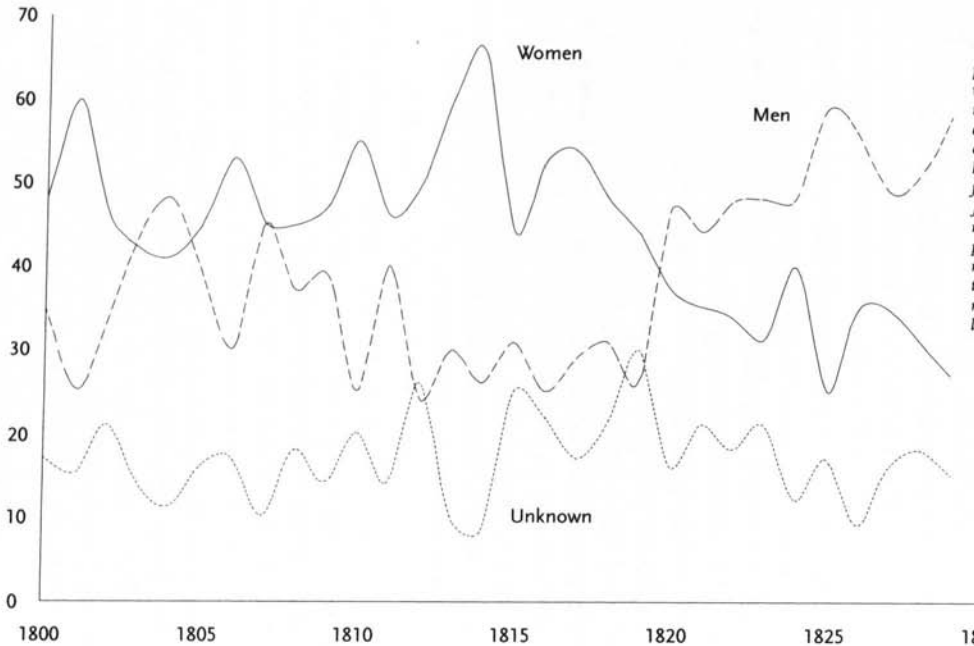
[15] William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment. The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1685–1750*, Berkeley 1998, p. 44; April Alliston, 'Love in Excess', in *Il romanzo*, vol. 1, *La cultura del romanzo*, Torino 2001, p. 650; Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin, *Edging Women Out*, New Haven 1989, pp. 7–8.

But, clearly, a mid-Victorian 'invasion' presupposes a reversal of the gender shift of the 1740s. And, in fact, this is what the historical record shows: if between 1750 and 1780, as a result of the initial shift, men publish indeed twice as many novels as women, in the late 1780s a second shift reverses the gender ratio, as one can see in Garside's breakdown for a slightly later period (figure 12, overleaf), in which women novelists (among them Burney, Radcliffe, Edgeworth, Austen) remain the majority until a third shift occurs, around 1820, towards male writers (Scott; then Bulwer, Dickens, Thackeray), to be followed by a fourth shift back to women in mid-century (the Brontës, Gaskell, Braddon, Eliot), and then by a fifth one—the 'edging out'—in the 1870s. Similar data are beginning to emerge for France, Spain, the US, and it's fascinating to see how researchers are convinced that they are all describing something unique (*the* gender shift, *the* elevation of the novel, *the* gentrification, *the* invention of high and low, *the* feminization, *the* sentimental education, *the* invasion . . .), whereas in all likelihood they are all observing the same comet that keeps crossing and recrossing the sky: the same *literary cycle*, where gender and genre are probably in synchrony with each other—a generation of military novels, nautical tales, and historical novels *à la* Scott attracting male writers, one of domestic, provincial and sensation novels attracting women writers, and so on.

Now, let me be clear, saying that these studies describe the return of the same literary cycle is not an objection: quite the opposite, my thesis *depends* on their findings, and it even corroborates them somehow, by finding the common mechanism which is at work in all those instances. But it's also true that if one reframes individual instances as moments of a cycle, then the nature of the questions changes: 'Events don't interest Lucien Febvre for what in them is unique', writes Pomian, but 'as units in a series, which reveal the conjunctural variations in . . . a conflict that remains constant throughout the period.'[16]

[16] Pomian, 'L'histoire des structures', p. 117.

FIGURE 12: *Authorship of new novels, Britain 1800–1829: gender breakdown (percentage)*



The 1810s show an even clearer pattern of female dominance, with women novelists out-producing their male counterparts in every year, and accounting for over 50 per cent of titles in six out of the eight years between 1810 and 1817 . . . As these figures indicate, the publication of Jane Austen's novels was achieved not against the grain but during a period of female ascendancy. It is noticeable that Scott's earliest historical novels were launched when male authorship of fiction was at a lower than usual ebb.

Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era'

Source: Garside, Raven and Schöwerling, eds, *The English Novel 1770–1829*.

Variations in a conflict that remains constant: this is what emerges at the level of the cycle—and if the conflict remains constant, then the point is not who prevails in this or that skirmish, but exactly the opposite: no victory is ever definitive, neither men nor women writers 'occupy' the British novel once and for all, and the form keeps oscillating back and forth between the two groups. And if this sounds like nothing is happening, no, what is happening *is the oscillation*, which allows the novel to use a double pool of talents and of forms, thereby boosting its productivity, and giving it an edge over its many competitors. But this process can only be glimpsed *at the level of the cycle*: individual episodes tend, if anything, to conceal it, and only the abstract pattern reveals the true nature of the historical process.[17]

X

Do cycles and genres explain everything, in the history of the novel? Of course not. But they bring to light its hidden tempo, and suggest some questions on what we could call its internal shape. For most literary historians, I mean, there is a categorical difference between 'the novel' and the various 'novelistic (sub)genres': the novel is, so to speak, the substance of the form, and deserves a full general

[17] A comparable oscillation is probably at work between High and Low forms, whose simultaneous existence is a well-known, if often ignored, fact of novelistic history: from the Hellenistic beginnings (divided between 'subliterary' and 'idealized' genres) through the Middle Ages, the seventeenth century (the *Bibliothèque Bleue*, and aristocratic novels), eighteenth (Warner's pair of 'entertainment' and 'elevation'), nineteenth (*feuilletons*, railway novels—and 'serious realism'), and twentieth century (pulp fiction—modernist experiments). Here, too, the strength of the novel is not to be found in *one* of the two positions, but in its rhythmical oscillation between them: the novel is not hegemonic because it makes it into High Culture (it does, yes, but it's so desperately professorial to be awed by this fact), but for the opposite reason: it is never *only* in High Culture, and it can keep playing on two tables, preserving its double nature, where vulgar and refined are almost inextricable.

theory; subgenres are more like accidents, and their study, however interesting, remains local in character, without real theoretical consequences. The forty-four genres of figure 9, however, suggest a different historical picture, where the novel does not develop as a single entity—where is 'the' novel, there?—but by periodically generating a whole set of genres, and then another, and another . . . Both synchronically and diachronically, in other words, the novel is *the system of its genres*: the whole diagram, not one privileged part of it. Some genres are morphologically more significant, of course, or more popular, or both—and we must account for this: but not by pretending that they are the only ones that exist. And instead, all great theories of the novel have precisely reduced the novel to one basic form only (realism, the dialogic, romance, meta-novels . . .); and if the reduction has given them their elegance and power, it has also erased nine tenths of literary history. Too much.

I began this chapter by saying that quantitative data are useful because they are independent of interpretation; then, that they are challenging because they often demand an interpretation that transcends the quantitative realm; now, most radically, we see them *falsify* existing theoretical explanations, and ask for a theory, not so much of 'the' novel, but of *a whole family of novelistic forms*. A theory—of diversity. What this may mean, will be the topic of my third chapter.

A NOTE ON THE TAXONOMY OF THE FORMS

The genres of figures 9 and 10 are listed below in the following way: current definition (in capitals); dates of beginning and end; and critical study from which I have drawn the chosen (and not always explicit) periodization. Since both figures are meant as a first panorama of a very large territory, soon to be improved by further work, a few words of caution are in order. First, except for the (rare) cases in which quantitative data or full bibliographies are available, the initial date refers to the genre's first recognizable example rather than to its genuine take-off, which occurs usually several years later; as our knowledge improves, therefore, it is likely that the chronological span of novelistic genres will turn out to be significantly shorter than the one given here. On the other hand, a few genres experience brief but intense revivals decades after their original peak, like the oriental tale in 1819–25, or the gothic after 1885, or the historical novel (more than once). How to account for these Draculaesque reawakenings is a fascinating topic, which however will have to wait for another occasion. Finally, the chart shows neither detective fiction nor science fiction; although both genres achieve their modern form around 1890 (Doyle and Wells), and undergo a major change in the 1920s, in step with the overall pattern, their peculiar long duration seems to require a different approach.

COURTSHIP NOVEL, 1740–1820: Katherine Sobba Green, *The Courtship Novel 1740–1820*, Kentucky 1991. PICARESQUE, 1748–90: F. W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, London 1907. ORIENTAL TALE, 1759–87: Ernest Baker, *The History of the English Novel*, London 1924, vol. v. EPISTOLARY NOVEL, 1766–95: James Raven, 'Historical Introduction', in Garside, Raven and Schöwerling, eds, *The English Novel 1770–1829*, vol. I. SENTIMENTAL NOVEL, 1768–90: John Mullan,

'Sentimental Novels', in John Richetti, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Cambridge 1996. 'Spy' novel, 1770–1800: Christopher Flint, 'Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction', *PMLA* 113 (2), March 1998, pp. 212–26. Ramble novel, 1773–90: Simon Dickie, *The Mid-Century 'Ramble' Novels*, PhD dissertation, Stanford 2000. Jacobin novel, 1789–1805: Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780–1805*, Oxford 1976. Gothic novel, 1790–1820: Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era', in Garside, Raven and Schöwerling, eds, *The English Novel 1770–1829*, vol. II. Anti-Jacobin novel, 1791–1805: M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, Cambridge 2001. National tale, 1800–31: Katie Trumpener, 'National Tale', in Paul Schellinger, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, Chicago 1998, vol. II. Village stories, 1804–32: Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789–1830*, London 1989. Evangelical novel, 1808–19: Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era'. Historical novel, 1814–48: Nicholas Rance, *The Historical Novel and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England*, New York 1975. Romantic farrago, 1822–47: Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period*. Silver-fork novel, 1825–42: Alison Adburgham, *Silver Fork Society*, London 1983. Military novel, 1826–50: Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era'. Nautical tales, 1828–50: Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period: 1830–90*, London 1985. Newgate novel, 1830–47: Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830–47*, Detroit 1963. Conversion novel, 1830–53: Sarah Gracombe, *Anxieties of Influence: Jewishness and English Culture in the Victorian Novel*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University 2003. Industrial novel, 1832–67: Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Chicago 1985. Sporting novel, 1838–67: John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*, Stanford 1989. Chartist novel, 1839–52: Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour*, New York 1985. Mysteries, 1846–70: Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London*, Charlottesville, VA 1992. Multiplot novel, 1846–72: Crisi Benford, *The Multiplot Novel and*

Victorian Culture, PhD dissertation, Stanford 2003. BILDUNGSROMAN, 1847–72: Michael Minden, 'Bildungsroman', in Schellinger, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, vol. II. RELIGIOUS NOVEL, 1848–56: Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*. DOMESTIC NOVEL, 1849–72: Sutherland, *Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*. PROVINCIAL NOVEL, 1850–73: Ian Duncan, 'The Provincial or Regional Novel', in Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing, eds, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Oxford 2003. SENSATION NOVEL, 1850–76: Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists*, London 1991. FANTASY, 1850–95: C. N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge 1975. CHILDREN'S ADVENTURES, 1851–83: Sutherland, *Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*. SCHOOL STORIES, 1857–81: Isabel Quigly, *The Heirs of Tom Brown*, London 1982. IMPERIAL ROMANCES, 1868–1902: Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys*, London 1991. INVASION LITERATURE, 1871–14: I. F. Clarke, *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871–1914*, Liverpool 1995. UTOPIA, 1872–1901: Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*. COCKNEY SCHOOL, 1872–97: Sutherland, *Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*. REGIONAL NOVEL, 1873–96: Duncan, 'The Provincial or Regional Novel'. NURSERY STORIES, 1876–1906: Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth Century Children*, London 1965. DECADENT NOVEL, 1884–1906: A. A. Mandal, 'Decadent Novel', in Schellinger, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, vol. I. NATURALIST NOVEL, 1885–1915: William Frierson, *L'influence du naturalisme français sur les romanciers anglais de 1885 à 1900*, Paris 1925. IMPERIAL GOTHIC, 1885–1916: Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, Ithaca 1988. NEW WOMAN NOVEL, 1888–99: Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, New Brunswick 1990. KAILYARD SCHOOL, 1888–1900: Sutherland, *Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*.